

Case study summary: Developing PARTICIPOLOGY as a learning and staff engagement tool within Natural England

Project Lead

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Project Aim

To develop and tailor PARTICIPOLOGY as a learning and staff engagement tool within Natural England specifically to enable staff to explore challenging decision making in a different way.

July - December 2015

Project Summary

This project was initiated with valuable support from Claudia Carter, Birmingham City University and it was agreed that it would be useful to develop separate boards and questions for the following landscapes:

- Urban-rural fringe (using existing RUFkit resource)
- Rural upland (using existing RUFkit resource)
- Coastal (using existing RUFkit resource)
- Lowland agricultural (specifically developed and including a river - based on the Wye Valley)

To secure the participation of colleagues across the organisation an invitation to contribute was issued to members of the internal Ecosystem Approach Network (>200 members). This

includes staff from both local delivery and national teams. Colleagues who expressed an interest were then invited to generate questions / challenging decision-making scenarios across all or some of the landscapes above. A sample of existing RUFkit urban-rural fringe questions were provided as a guide. More than 40 scenarios and/or questions were generated through this approach.

A development team comprising volunteer colleagues (listed above) attended a workshop supported by Claudia Carter on 9th September 2015 to trial the boards and questions and explore next steps in its development and application.

At the workshop it was agreed that PARTICIPOLOGY would be particularly valuable as a tool to support embedding of the Ecosystem Approach and Natural England's Outcomes Approach. In order to ensure that the behaviours and breadth of these would be picked up by players it was agreed that it would be helpful to group questions by the following themes and as players moved around the board they would encounter at least one question from each theme:

1. Working with stakeholders / beneficiaries
2. Delivering multiple outcomes
3. Working at the landscape scale / interconnections
4. Managing for the longer term

A second workshop with the same team of participants was held on 7th October 2015 to play the upland version of the game with questions structured around the themes above. As play progressed the questions were re-ordered, refined and simplified. By playing the game a number of key design considerations for Natural England emerged:

- The game needs to begin with some of the less challenging questions / scenarios to ease participants in. As a result the outcomes based questions were moved to the top of the list above and no 'chance' questions would be introduced at this stage of the game.
- All questions need to be feasible and sense-checked against the scenarios Natural England staff encounter.
- The questions need to be framed using non-suggestive language, avoiding words like 'impact on' 'object to' etc.
- Great care is needed in framing questions so that participants are not pushed down a regulation route.

- A set of facilitation notes for each question would be helpful to widen the scope of the discussion if needed. For example, after 5 minutes in, or at the end of each question, flip over the card to reveal ‘have you thought about....’ points.
- A snake design through the landscape would be better than circular around it.

Next steps in the development of PARTICIPOLOGY for Natural England identified but not realised in the specific project timeframe were:

1. Taking an adapted version of the upland board and refined questions out to volunteer local delivery teams to evaluate the progress of play, effectiveness and reception with staff.
2. Developing and refining a broader suite of questions for the remaining landscapes with willing delivery teams.

Difficulties and constraints

Initial interest in contributing to the development of PARTICIPOLOGY was relatively high, but as the actual ask of colleagues’ time increased the number of people who could practically contribute reduced significantly. This reflected it being a ‘nice to do’ / ‘good to do’ thing for colleagues rather than one of their ‘must do’ commitments. In that context the contribution made by those in the development team was significant and invaluable.

In the context of the above, to be widely used and adopted within Natural England as an engagement or training tool, the game needs to be designed so that a full session, from introduction and explanation to playing and feedback, runs for little more than an hour. This makes it suitable for use as an interactive staff development session in team meetings. These typically run over 3-4 hours but would also have to include a range of other business and PARTICIPOLOGY would be unlikely to be the primary objective.

To gain traction and resource for further development the benefits of PARTICIPOLOGY as a training tool needs to be linked specifically to key organisational priorities. An hour session described above would enable it to sit within and contribute to a broader development / training programme which considerably increases the possibility that it would be used.

Future development

Natural England has adopted the Outcomes Approach as our way of working with partners and stakeholders, the principles of which are:

- Engaging early, listening to what people want and helping them achieve their aims in a way that benefits the environment but takes account of their circumstances.
- Building a common understanding of what we are trying to do on the ground, seeking the best outcomes for everybody at the right pace.
- Being open minded, flexible and focussing on problem solving
- Being completely transparent and answering questions in a way that people can understand.
- Providing clear and objective advice based on an even-handed view of the best available evidence.

The potential of PARTICIPOLOGY to be used as a 'safe' and engaging training tool within Natural England to stimulate discussion around applying the Outcomes Approach in different scenarios is significant. Future development will therefore be linked to specifically exploring the synergies with this programme of work and potential staff development that will be associated with its embedding.